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ABSTRACT

Defining a writing center as a collection of activities and materials in a classroom for the purpose of stimulating, guiding, and encouraging children to write, this booklet offers suggestions for establishing and operating such a center. Various sections offer a rationale for the center, present activities to stimulate both creative and expository writing, and detail the equipment and materials needed for the center. (FL)

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Writing Centers in the Elementary School

By Duane R. Tovey

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

What Is a Writing Center? 6

Rationale for a Writing Center 7
- Writing Starts with Meaning 7
- Children Can Apply Their Oral Language Competencies .. 7
- Writing Eliminates the Abstraction of Traditional Language Instruction 7
- Children Improve Their Thinking Through Writing 8

Selected Activities, Materials, and Equipment for a Writing Center 10
- Activities To Stimulate Creative Writing 10
- Aesthetics and Writing 13
- Make-Believe and Fun 16
- Writing Together 18

Activities To Stimulate Expository Writing 25
- "People Are Important" Activities 25
- Write To Learn 29

Materials and Equipment for a Writing Center 32
- Reference Materials 32
- Art Materials 33
- Audiovisual Equipment 33
- Writing Guides for Children 35

In Conclusion 38

What Is a Writing Center?

A writing center is a collection of activities and materials in a classroom for the purpose of stimulating, guiding, and encouraging children to write. Materials are usually displayed or arranged in an artistic manner on a selected theme (e.g., Christmas, Africa, baseball, winter). Themes may vary according to children's interests, curriculum topics, and special days or events. A writing center may utilize bulletin boards, banners, bookcases, room dividers, colorful paper, posters, and so on to stimulate new ideas and help children learn. The writing center materials should be arranged functionally so that each item is readily accessible and easily returned to its original location.

Besides providing an attractive setting for the display and storage of writing materials, a writing center should also provide writing stations where children have a special and private place to write. Materials such as special stationery for writing friendly letters and official school stationery for writing business letters lend an air of distinction to the center. The writing center should not be viewed, however, as the only place for children to write. A writing center's main function is to provide stimulation for writing.

Children do not write naturally. They need real, exciting, and important reasons for encoding their thoughts. Without a legitimate purpose, writing seems unimportant and pointless for many children. Children need to be encouraged to write creatively but they should also be taught expository writing. Activities are needed to inspire many types of expository writing, including those related to subject areas. These writing activities, however, should be planned to complement the regular curriculum, thus avoiding "tack-on" assignments that are unrelated to instructional objectives.

Rationale for a Writing Center

Writing Starts with Meaning

When children are given the opportunity to write about their thoughts and experiences, even beginning writers do very well. When children wish to communicate their thoughts, they soon realize the real purpose for writing. No one knows what happens within children's minds when they write. We do know, however, that children can write when given a legitimate purpose for writing and when provided with assistance as needed.

Children Can Apply Their Oral Language Competencies

Most children enter school as competent users of their native oral language. They have learned the organization of language (grammar) and internalized the way words are formed and function in sentences without the benefit of formal instruction. They seem to have a built-in capacity for learning to process language.

Even very young schoolchildren know how words are combined into sentences. What they need to learn are the written conventions of language in order to encode their thoughts graphically; that is, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and so forth. Learning the mechanical aspects of writing appears to be a relatively simple task when compared with learning the grammar and phonology of language. When children begin to write, they can capitalize on their already highly developed language abilities.

Writing Eliminates the Abstraction of Traditional Language Instruction

Children are great users of language but encounter difficulty when asked to analyze it. Once language is broken into bits and pieces as so often happens in many language texts, children frequently become confused because of the level of abstraction. Whenever children are required to label words, underline subjects and predicates, and explain the rules of punctuation and capitalization, they are being asked to analyze language, which is a highly abstract procedure. Such exercises do little to help children learn to write. They can, however, teach chil-

dren to dislike language instruction and convince them that they are inadequate users of their own language. To learn to encode one's thoughts in writing requires a great deal of practice, stimulation, and encouragement. The mechanics of writing will usually be learned and retained when linked to significant writing activities and taught as needed.

Children Improve Their Thinking Through Writing

Children not only improve their writing skills by writing but also their understanding of the world about them. The best way to learn or test one's understanding of a concept is to write or talk about it. Because writing is by definition the encoding of thoughts, it helps clarify, extend, and improve the quality of thought.

Writing centers stimulate language and content learning, and they can also serve to encourage children to express their innermost feelings and thoughts. Every child has much to share. Children's ideas must be respected and listened to if thinking and writing abilities are to be extended. After thoughts have been generated, children must be given appropriate guidance for putting their ideas in writing.

Children can be introduced to writing by dictating their thoughts to their teacher. While they dictate, the teacher writes. While writing, the teacher pronounces words making certain the child watches the words being written. Soon children will want to write themselves, with the teacher helping as needed. Eventually, children become independent writers, being guided only as their specific writing problems are diagnosed.

Children's writing should be shared, but it need not always be with the teacher. Writing can also be read by peers, parents, brothers, and sisters. It is easy to convince a child to share his writing when the writing is related to a purpose important to the child. Teachers should, however, read a sample of each student's writing weekly. From this sampling, teachers can identify one or two of the most glaring writing problems for each student. Children can then be grouped for instruction according to their particular weaknesses.

If children are to write freely and openly, they must be in a classroom where trust exists between teacher and students. When students

are intimidated they write less, and the writing that does emerge is often stifled and less than honest. If we begin with positive, worthwhile experiences, children will find it easy to write. Children will communicate when they have something to share.

Let us now see how a writing center can implement the ideas discussed above.

Selected Activities, Materials, and Equipment for a Writing Center

This chapter describes specifically what a writing center is and how to plan and develop one. A brief commentary accompanies each activity description to clarify its use in a writing center.

Activities To Stimulate Creative Writing

The activities in this section are based on children's everyday experiences and language patterns. They encourage children to write creatively as well as to think of common objects, situations, and events in creative ways. Children's creative writing not only produces delightful products and pleasant experiences, it also provides children opportunities to think thoughts that they have never thought before.

The bulletin board ideas and poster activities discussed below are basic components of a writing center. They can provide artistic, eye-catching themes to stimulate many types of writing. The Box Items, Things, Common Objects, and Empty Books also described in this section provide additional ideas for motivating writing.

Bulletin Boards can be used to present themes that require children to write as an integral part of the display, or they can be used simply as the focal point for a theme. Illustrative bulletin board ideas listed below provide a variety of writing opportunities for children.

Circus theme: A clown figure holds balloons, each of which has a circus picture on it.

Christmas theme: The poem "The Night before Christmas" is illustrated to depict the inside of a home. Children are asked to write a cumulative poem jointly authored by members of the class.

Winter theme: Children write winter stories and poems that are exhibited on designated objects in a winter snow scene.

Baseball theme: The poem "Casey at the Bat" is illustrated. Children are invited to write poems to go with other baseball pictures on the bulletin board.

Posters can be made from 18" x 24" pieces of colored tagboard, construction paper, cloth, and other materials. Posters serve much the same function as bulletin boards for motivating children's writing. Stimulate children's ideas for writing by using the following poster ideas.

Gypsy fortuneteller: A palm-reading gypsy is illustrated with writing ideas placed on hand-shaped cutouts on the poster.

Past/future time capsules: Writing ideas are placed in Leggs pantyhose containers that are glued to the poster.

Pick-a-posie: Writing ideas are placed on flower petals.

Haunted house: Writing ideas are placed on ghosts that are floating around the house.

Box items contain various objects to encourage children to write about ideas they find in the box.

Think tank: This box contains story starters written on cutout question marks.

Treasure chest: This box contains story starters written on gold coin replicas.

Mystery box: This box contains beginning paragraphs to stimulate the writing of mystery stories.

Mailbox: This box enables children to send notes to their friends. Mail is delivered by a classroom messenger each day.

Things are easily made constructions that can stimulate writing in varied and delightful ways.

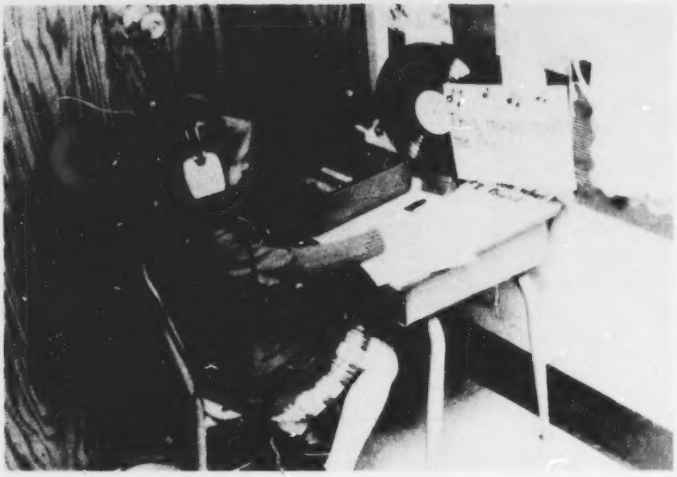
Idea tree: A branch is used as a tree with story starters printed on paper leaves.

Jabber jar: Small objects such as a burned match, bottlecap, fish hook, or piece of cloth are placed in a jar. To stimulate children's imaginations, questions on the jar ask, What is it? Where did it come from? Who used it?

Pick-a-pocket: A buttoned shirt is hung on a clothes hanger with trousers pinned to the shirt. Writing ideas are placed in the shirt and trouser pockets.

Catch a bluebird: A cardboard birdhouse is constructed with story starters written on bluebirds that are flocking around the house.

Common objects, such as a worn bicycle tire, chewed bone, or rusty skate are displayed with questions: Where has it been? What happened? Who was involved? Why did it happen? Other objects for use in this way could be an old shoe, a well-chewed pencil, a catcher's mitt, a battered suitcase.



Empty books of various shapes and sizes can be made using construction paper, contact paper, and wallpaper. They can be shaped like animals, sports equipment, automobiles, umbrellas, and so on. Tiny, large, tall and thin, and short and wide books might also suggest different topics to write about. With the various shaped book covers provided, pages for the book can be made by tracing around the cover. In most cases, stories will not be placed in the book until the story has been perfected. Other ideas for book shapes include animals (duck, rabbit, kangaroo, tiger); inanimate objects (star, police car, bell, cup); sports items (boxing glove, fishing hat, basketball, catcher's mask); food (carrot, hamburger, cabbage, pizza).

Aesthetics and Writing

The world around us provides innumerable stimuli for creative writing. The sounds, sights, and smells of nature and other sensory experiences can provide exciting ways of stimulating thoughts within children. Through insightful questions, teachers can elicit much student discussion and eventual writing. The following activities repre-

sent only a few of the many ideas related to "the world around us."

Open the window: Have the children stand by an open window and listen carefully to the sounds they hear. Introduce children to descriptive writing by listing descriptive words and phrases that children contribute.

Take a walk: A walk through the neighborhood, cemetery, or woods provides an excellent way of helping children become more sensitive to their physical environment. Prepare children to be perceptive observers before the trip. Help children generate descriptive language before they begin their writing about their experiences on the trip.

Bring it to class: Encourage children to bring flowers, animals, leaves, and insects to share with the class. Writing follows after much talking, feeling, looking, and smelling.

Audiovisual materials: Films, filmstrips, audiotapes, records, and overhead transparencies expose children to things in the outside world. These new ideas stimulate writing. Such audiovisual materials are available from the school's media center or may be brought from home by the children. Before writing, children can interact in small groups to share thoughts and impressions.

Children's literature can be used to inspire children to do many kinds of creative writing. Here are some suggestions.

Write the last chapter: Ask children to read a book up to the last chapter and then write their own versions of the final chapter.

Write a tall tale, fairy tale, or fable: These literary forms are familiar to children and provide yet another appealing way of motivating children to write. Read many such stories to children and then have them read selections of the same type. Follow these reading experiences with discussions before asking children to write their own fairy tale or fable.

Write a picture book: After reading a book to the class, divide students into groups to draw a sequence of pictures following the plot

of the story. Then individual children may dictate or write about the particular picture each drew. Upon completion, each group will have its own collective version of the story.

Write a new old story: Read a fairy tale to your class or have children read their favorites individually. After reading, help children develop a story using the theme of the original tale but with different characters and situations for their story.

Art-related activities can help children develop an appreciation of the artist's medium of communication as well as provide a stimulus for writing. Abstract painting and sculpture are especially good for generating creative stories.

Abstract art: Show the children an abstract painting or a piece of sculpture. After small-group discussions, ask children to write a story based on the ideas stimulated by the art piece.

Famous prints: After displaying and discussing a famous painting, have children write stories based on the happenings in the picture.

About colors: Read Mary O'Neill's *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* to the class. Then guide each student to identify his or her favorite color and describe how that color makes him or her feel.

Write and illustrate a haiku: Expose your students to oriental art based on the natural beauty of the world. Read many haiku selections to your students. Then have them write a haiku and illustrate it.

Music-related activities are also an effective mode for stimulating writing.

What did you hear? Play a recording of program music, such as "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Moussorgsky. Follow up by asking children to write a story based on the feelings generated by the music.

Rock songs: Have children bring records of popular rock songs. Play a song and have the children listen to the words and describe how the character in the song felt or how the song makes them feel.

Music without words: Play a musical selection that has no words. Have children write poetry that indicates the way the music made them feel. Conclude the activity by having students read their original poems to the accompaniment of the music.

Musical instrument stories: Use recordings or have children in your class or school demonstrate the characteristics and sounds produced by various instruments of the orchestra or band. Follow up with a discussion dealing with the "personality" of each instrument. Conclude by having each child write a story with selected instruments as the characters.

Make-Believe and Fun

Children have great imaginations and love to make believe. Teachers can capitalize on these abilities in children. Following are examples of activities that could be included in a writing center to encourage children to use their imaginations.

If I were . . .: These topics stimulate children to envision themselves in various social roles. This writing activity is also a good way to learn children's attitudes and value systems. The list of roles for this activity is unending. Students might write about "If I were (the principal of my school; the teacher; the President of the United States; or my dad . . .)."

What if . . .? This activity enables children to experience various situations vicariously through the use of their imaginations. This list of situations is also unending: "What if (the world were flat; people had no hair; there were no birds in the world; you had everything you wanted)?"

Let's pretend: This is another series of open-ended topics that introduces children to personification; that is, animals and inanimate objects take on human characteristics. Examples are: I am a plow horse who lives in Kentucky; I am an eraser on a pencil; I am a mouse who lives in the principal's office; I am a tiger without any stripes.

(Happiness) is . . .: This activity helps children think about the meaning of abstract terms that they use frequently but that are difficult to define. Such an exercise might help children clarify and articulate their feelings about others and themselves. Topics could include: Love is . . . ; Anger is . . . ; Loneliness is . . . ; Joy is . . . .

Just for fun. Most children enjoy having fun and being silly. The activities listed below capitalize on this interest and motivate children to write. Such activities help children overcome the notion that writing must be unpleasant.

Write a riddle about our science unit.

Write a joke about the women's liberation movement.

Create your favorite cartoon character from a plastic bleach bottle and other selected materials. Then write a story about him or her.

Write a nonsense story about when your dog joined the army.

Action activities. These activities give children the opportunity to interact with their classmates. The fun inherent in these activities helps children overcome their inhibitions to write.

Write it, don't say it: For 10 minutes each day the only way anyone is allowed to communicate with classmates is by writing. Students can communicate as much as they wish but they cannot talk.

Food to eat: A lunch is brought to school for each member of the class. After eating, the class discusses and writes about the food using descriptive words and phrases describing how the food smelled, tasted, looked, and felt.

Fish for an idea: Writing ideas are written on paper fish. Each fish has a paper clip for a mouth and is caught when the child "goes fishing" with a magnet on the end of fishing pole string. This is a fun activity for younger children.

Fill in the balloons: Cut the dialogue balloons out of a comic strip. Mount the comic strip on white paper. The child's task is to write a new dialogue. These comic strips can be used over and over if clear acetate is placed over the picture and children write on it with a grease pencil.

Writing Together

Children enjoy taking part in group writing activities. For those students who previously have not written much, this is an effective way of helping them begin. Group writing activities provide rewarding social experiences and are less demanding than individual writing activities. Thoughts are generated by the group and the spelling and mechanical problems are shared. Such activities can make a significant contribution to a writing center. Besides stimulating thinking, writing, and socialization, team writing projects produce an esprit de corps within the class. This feeling in turn stimulates more enthusiasm for writing and helps overcome negative feelings many students associate with it.

Cumulative stories. Starting with an initial paragraph, children make their contributions to the story as it is passed from one to another. Schedule this activity as independent work. After the story is completed, children enjoy listening for the part they wrote when the story is read orally by the teacher. Throughout the school year, completed cumulative stories can be placed in an anthology booklet. This could be reproduced so that each child has a copy. Following are some story starters.

I have a cute, shaggy-haired dog named Blondie. Blondie is a "he" dog who somehow was given the name Blondie. One day as I was feeding him, he looked at me, with ears standing up and said, "I don't really like this dog food. I would rather have a big steak!" I stood in shocked amazement. My Blondie actually talked.

The light got brighter and brighter as the ship settled toward the earth. Then there was a slight flutter and it came to rest. I held my breath, wondering what would happen next. Suddenly a hole in the bottom of the ship opened up and a ladder came down slowly. The figures that came out were round, spindly legged, and bright green in color—just like Mars creatures are supposed to look. What should I do? Should I speak? Should I run? I decided to stay in my hiding place a moment more. I heard them talking a kind of jibberish, so I decided to call them Jabberwalkies. But wait—what were they doing?

It was a beautiful autumn day. The trees were ablaze with color and the sun shone all day. The class was quietly working as the teacher glanced at the clock. As she handed Cathy a Kleenex for her ever-dripping nose and motioned to absent-minded Tom to pull up his pants zipper, the loudspeaker crackled and a voice said, "Tomorrow will be a free day; there will be no school!" The children began to jump and scream with joy. One fellow was dancing on his desk, and a girl was happily singing a tune. The teacher stood in shocked amazement. Why would school be closed in the middle of the fall? She had to find out what was wrong!

Waves rolled endlessly toward the shore, crashing furiously against the gray rocks, sending countless sprays of foam skyward. I shivered on a cold, slimy rock. The sun was slowly setting behind the thundering ocean. I have been shipwrecked on this island for a week. I wonder how this all happened to me. When I set sail in my new boat the day was balmy with only a gentle breeze. Then I remembered the noise I heard—it sounded as if something were breaking apart.

Class newspaper. Involving children in the publication of a class newspaper is a team project that provides many opportunities for writing. Most children can become involved in some aspect of the publication. Duties can be assigned on the basis of interest and ability. After the newspaper is typed and duplicated, most children are delighted to receive their personal copies and see their writing in print. Class newspapers are usually organized around topics such as school and room

news, children's stories and poems, sports, jokes and cartoons, editorial opinion.

Class anthology of poetry. Another good group writing project is a class poetry anthology. Throughout the school year, children's poems can be collected into a loose-leaf anthology. Poems are categorized by topics, and a common format is used regarding type of paper, ink color, number of illustrations, and type style. The original book becomes a part of the classroom library. Copies can be reproduced for each child and the school library. Such a project helps children develop a sense of pride in their writing. A similar project can be organized to assemble a collection of students' stories.

Discussion and writing teams. Introduce children to fictitious situations through the use of topic sentences and questions that suggest additional details. Given these questions and topic sentences, three to five children collectively discuss and write a story. The group dynamics inherent in this activity produce highly creative writing. An alternative procedure is to start with a group discussion to generate ideas, and then have each individual write his own story. Here are four sample situations:

1. Slumping in the lifeboat, the survivors watched the ship sink from sight.
   Where are all the places this story could take place?
   Who are the different people that could be in this story?
   What are all the possible weather conditions for this story?
   When might this story take place?

2. Mary, looking out the window of the plane, noticed one of the wings was on fire.
   Where is Mary going?
   Who is with her?
   Why is she on this trip?
   What are the weather conditions?
   When is this story taking place?

3. While exploring the attic of an old house, Bill, smelling smoke, rushed to the door and found it locked.
   Why was Bill in the attic?
   Who are some other people that might be in the story?
   When might this story be taking place?
   What weather conditions might be outside the old house?

4. With a thunderous crash, a large gray boulder sealed the entrance to the cave.
   Are any people in the cave? Who might they be?
   Where might this story take place?
   How does the cave look? Is it big, little, damp, scary?
   When is the story taking place?

Spin-a-story. This activity is played by a team of five children. Each takes a turn spinning a pointer on a clock-like dial that is numbered from one to 10. Using the coded lists below, the first child spins to determine the male character of the story, the second child spins to identify the female character, and so forth. This process is followed by team discussion and then writing. Spin-a-story can also be used by individual students.

Characters (Male)	Characters (Female)
1. My dad	1. My mother
2. My uncle	2. The librarian
3. My grandfather	3. A telephone operator
4. Our minister	4. My grandmother
5. My teacher	5. A neighbor
6. A department store clerk	6. The doctor
7. A policeman	7. A bus driver
8. The dentist	8. An airplane pilot
9. The barber	9. The doctor's secretary
10. A taxi driver	10. My aunt

Animals in the story	Time of the story
1. My little dog	1. Early in the morning

2. My big dog
3. Buttons, our cat
4. Tico, our pet parakeet
5. My goldfish
6. A monkey in the pet store
7. A lion in the zoo
8. A squirrel in our yard
9. My pet gerbil
10. Three ducks

2. On a frosty winter night
3. The middle of the night
4. Just as the sun was rising
5. As the clock struck 3:00
6. On a hot summer day
7. On a gray November day
8. In the middle of a rainstorm
9. Early in autumn
10. On a bright spring morning

Situation

1. A lost pet
2. A broken window
3. A missing bracelet
4. A burning house
5. Forgotten homework
6. A surprise
7. When I ran the fastest
8. A cat in the tree
9. A driverless car
10. Alone and frightened

Commercials. Most children have been exposed to hundreds of hours of television and radio commercials. They have rich backgrounds on which to draw when asked to write their own commercials. Commercials are most effective when used in the context of "breaks" during a student-produced TV, radio, or puppet show. Television shows can be staged with a cardboard set constructed by children or by using a videotape camera, if available. Radio shows can be effectively produced by using the public address system in the principal's office and "broadcasting" to selected classrooms. Tin can microphones in the classroom also make broadcasting exciting for children.

Scroll shows. Ask children to produce television shows by using a cardboard box with the bottom partially cut out. Pictures illustrated on a shelf paper scroll can then be viewed through the opening. A

group of children can share the responsibilities for writing the script and producing the scroll illustrations. Such presentations can be based on children's interests, social studies units, current events, or a popular television series.

Puppet plays. Writing scripts, constructing props, and presenting puppet plays based on children's real interests are exciting and effective ways for children to write and work cooperatively. Instructions for constructing various types of puppets are described in numerous publications, many of which are available at public libraries.

Activities To Stimulate Expository Writing

Expository writing is often neglected in the elementary school due to an overemphasis on creative writing. Creative writing generally refers to imaginative stories while expository writing is thought to be more factual and informative. Such distinctions, however, do not always accurately describe writing styles. Is it possible to write a creative story without presenting information inherent to the story? Or is it possible to produce an expository piece without original and creative thinking? It would appear that all writing by its very nature is both creative and informative. Nevertheless, there is some justification for dealing with creative and expository writing as separate categories.

The following expository writing activities fall under two main headings, "People Are Important" and "Write To Learn." "People Are Important" activities capitalize on children's high interest and knowledge about important persons in their lives. "Write To Learn" activities relate writing to learning in the content areas. Hopefully, these ideas will encourage children to write effectively for various purposes and in various writing styles.

"People Are Important" Activities

Having children write about themselves and others provides an array of topics for expository writing. Children's relationships with family and peers are probably the most significant factors in children's lives, and writing about those relationships provides many opportunities for them to communicate their thoughts.

About yourself. What topics interest children more than those related to themselves and their family? Children know more about their everyday experiences than any other subject. Capitalizing on this self-interest can lead to such writing activities as described below.

Writing diaries: Giving children time to write in a diary each day is an excellent way of encouraging children to write. The entries can be short and private. Writing diaries is an effective way to demonstrate to children that writing is merely the encoding of one's thoughts. Procedures for the construction and use of diaries can be worked out cooperatively with children.

Writing about my family: Starting with drawings or photographs of children's families is a fun way to motivate children to write. Such writing will probably be longer, more complex grammatically, and more interesting; yet children are likely to find it easier than other kinds of writing. Such an activity can vary in sophistication from one page containing a picture with one dictated sentence to a lengthy and comprehensive family biography.

Autobiographies: Self-interest can also lead to the writing of auto-

biographies. When writing autobiographies, as well as other expository types of writing, children need to be made aware of the unique stylistic demands of particular types of writing.

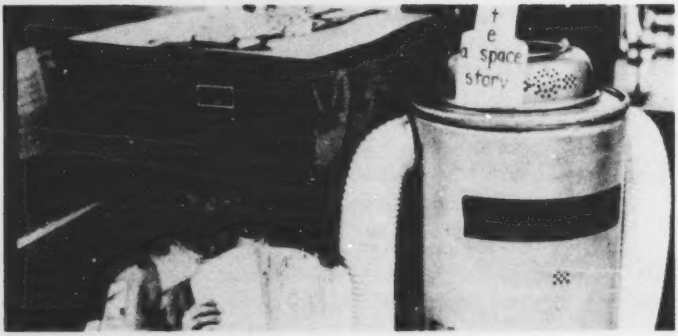
My pets: Even timid children respond enthusiastically when asked to write about their dogs, cats, or pet rabbits. The writing task becomes much easier for children when they are communicating about topics of personal interest.

About others. Children's interest in other people's behavior, attitudes, and perceptions can lead to writing based on their relationships with friends, classmates, adults, or famous personalities.

Famous personalities: Ask children to bring a picture of their favorite TV, sports, movie, or music personality to place on a bulletin board. Each child selects a picture. The task is to research and write a description of the subject's life. However, the person's name and the activities that brought him or her fame are not included in the report. Background information can be obtained from TV, sports, and movie magazines; record jackets; or by writing publicity departments for information. When the reports are completed, each author reads his or her composition aloud while the class views the pictures. After hearing the report, the children in the class try to guess the personality described.

Student of the day: Each morning a student's name is drawn randomly from a box. Then a Polaroid picture is taken of the person whose name was drawn. The picture is placed on a "Student of the Day" bulletin board. The object of the activity is for all class members to write a note saying something nice about each Student of the Day. All notes are placed on the bulletin board. The process continues until all names have been drawn.

Facial expressions: Facial expressions can often tell a story. Have children choose a picture with an extraordinary facial expression and write a story based on their perceptions of that visage. Besides providing a good reason for writing, this activity also provides an opportunity for children to become more aware of nonverbal communication.



My favorite friend: Have your students write a biographical story about their favorite friend. The story might deal with the friend's personal interests, mannerisms, abilities, and social relationships. One beneficial side effect of this kind of writing assignment is that it can increase children's friendships and appreciation of one another.

Letter writing. Children (and sometimes teachers, too) tend to separate the world in the schoolroom from the "real world." Perhaps this distinction stems from the artificiality of the activities often associated with school. Letter writing can help to bridge that gap by providing a real purpose for writing. Below are suggested materials and guides to be included in a writing center to motivate children to write business and friendly letters.

A variety of special stationery for boys and girls should be available to inspire children to write personal letters. Official school stationery could also be used for business letters when appropriate.

A writing center could include a special chair and table for writing letters. Children should help make rules that establish procedures for its use.

Zip code maps, addresses of pen pals, and frequently used business addresses should also be readily available in the writing center.

Write To Learn

Content area activities. Writing facilitates thought. Therefore, writing should be an integral part of the content areas of the curriculum. If children are to learn to think social studies, science, and math, they need opportunities to clarify and extend their thoughts by talking and writing about those topics. Writing about content areas provides practice in using the specialized vocabulary in the various disciplines. Such writing activities improve both children's writing and their understanding of concepts being considered. Sample activities are listed below.

Social studies and science research reports: The writing center can support research activities by 1) creating bulletin board and poster activities on themes related to units of study; 2) providing many writing activities linked to content instruction; and 3) providing general reference materials related to spelling, usage, writing style, synonyms, and documentation. Selected reference materials can be temporarily placed in the writing center as part of a featured writing project.

Historical characters, places, and situations: For social studies concepts to come alive, activities must be related to children's experiences. Role playing, dramatizations, puppet shows, media productions, and the reading of historical fiction all enable a child to relive the past. These activities can be followed by written descriptions or analyses of what transpired during a particular activity. Activities based on characters, places, and situations of the past provide exciting ways for children to relate to past and/or distant cultures.

Science fiction stories: One of the major skills of scientific inquiry is the forming of hypotheses. Forming hypotheses requires both an understanding of what is and an ability to make reasonable predictions based on present knowledge. Encouraging children to write science fiction stories provides an opportunity to hypothesize about future developments based on present knowledge. This activity provides an excellent stimulus for writing and also develops insightful and divergent thinking.

Writing story problems for math: An effective way to help children

overcome the confusion and abstractness related to story problems in math is to have them write problems for their peers to solve. Besides providing excellent math instruction, such an experience provides another legitimate reason for asking children to write.

Newspaper-related activities. The daily newspaper is a readily available resource that can be related to all curriculum areas. The newspaper-related activities suggested below provide children with purposes for writing and also relate to content areas.

Headlines: Eye-catching headlines make great story starters. They can be cut out of the newpaper and filed by topic. Even though some headlines become dated and the stories that children write are fictitious, they have an opportunity to practice news writing. At the same time, they are learning to write in an enjoyable way.

Sound-off: A special bulletin board is placed in a writing center for children's notes to express their opinions on current topics of interest. This opportunity to voice their opinions and to read the opinions of others might help children become more sensitive to the wishes of others.

Dear Abby: Children write to Abby regarding a personal or social problem using an anonymous name. Once a week the questions are read and discussed by the class, which then attempts to arrive at an answer to the problem that reflects the consensus of the class. Notes are typewritten to insure anonymity. Such a procedure encourages students to think critically and to not accept every idea that is expressed.

What do you think? This activity directs children's attention to articles in newspapers or magazines that are related to their school work. After reading an article of their choice, children write their reactions to it and place them in a container. Children take turns reading the entries and leading subsequent discussions.

Special days, events, seasons, and sports. Children enjoy the excitement of special occasions and festivities celebrated throughout the

year. These events provide a wealth of topics to stimulate creative writing as well as research-oriented expository writing. Discovering the derivation and characteristics of such happenings can become an integral part of social studies or science units. Capitalize on children's high interests in the following topics.

Special days: Christmas, Easter, Halloween, Valentine's Day, Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays, St. Patrick's Day, April Fool's Day, May Day.

Events: Open house, children's birthdays, new student, class trips, visiting speaker.

Seasons and sports: Spring, summer, winter, fall; baseball, basketball, football, track, hunting, fishing.

Sayings. Cliches, platitudes, proverbs, slogans, and popular commercials reflect cultural attitudes, values, points of view, and beliefs. Even though such expressions are often trite, they do communicate and reflect the sentiments of a wide segment of society. Writing explanations of such expressions encourages students to consider their meaning in the social context in which they are used.

Materials and Equipment for a Writing Center

Besides providing a vast array of activities to stimulate children's thoughts, writing centers should also include various types of paper and writing instruments, as well as materials and equipment to facilitate and encourage writing. The following items are commonly used in a writing center.

Reference Materials

Reference materials in a writing center should be limited to those related to general writing.

Picture dictionaries and dictionaries. Dictionaries of different levels should be provided to match children's needs. They should range from picture dictionaries to those comprehensive enough to satisfy gifted children's requirements.

Thesaurus. This kind of reference volume is an indispensable tool for the writer. Children will need specific instruction in the use of a thesaurus in order to gain skill in the use of synonyms. Children will use a thesaurus if situations are planned to create a need for using one. The mere presence of a thesaurus does not assure its use.

Handbooks of English. Reference sources regarding capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, agreement of subject and verb, and acceptable usage are necessities for the writer. If children are to become effective writers, they need to make use of appropriate reference materials. These handbook materials can range from children's language textbooks to more sophisticated publications. Writing problems frequently encountered by a group of children can be alleviated in part by placing exemplary information on poster charts.

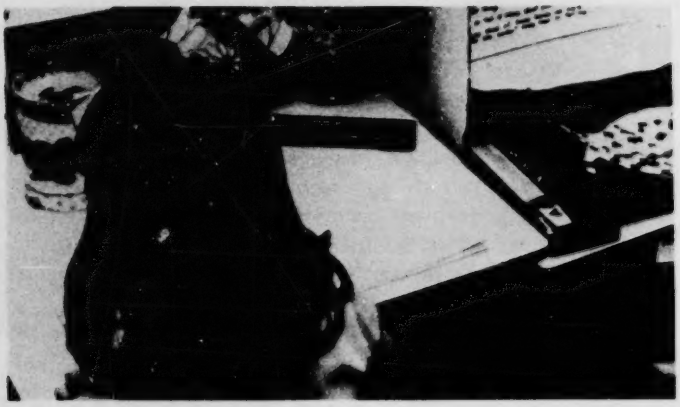
Encyclopedias. Encyclopedias provide children with a limited amount of information on a wide range of topics. For many children, this resource answers most of their research needs. Older and more able children, however, should not be limited to this one source of data.

Art Materials

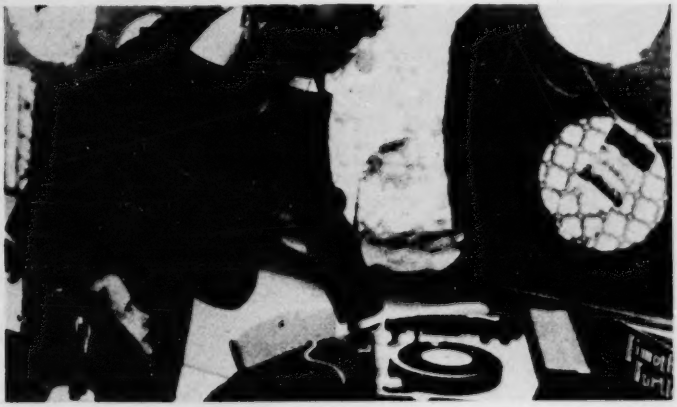
Clay, easels, painting supplies, soap, pipe cleaners, and other materials can be useful in the writing center. These materials and related activities should be varied periodically to insure children's continued interest. The number of art activities to be used at any one time and the length of time they are displayed will depend on the children's interest and the activities involved.

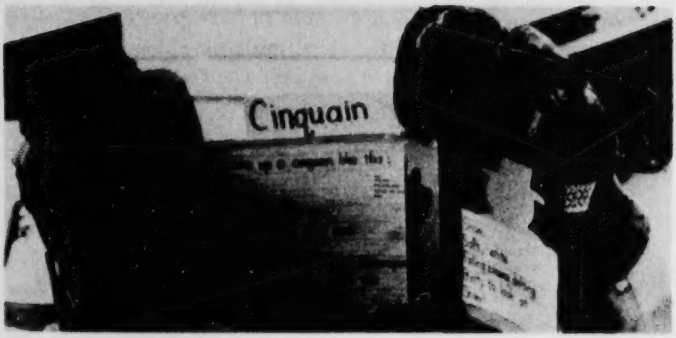
Audiovisual Equipment

Audiovisual equipment adds yet another dimension to a writing center. Record players, tape recorders, overhead projectors, filmstrip



projectors, and movie projectors can be used effectively to stimulate creative writing. Records, tapes, overhead transparencies, filmstrips and movies can be purchased commercially, brought from home, or prepared by children and teachers to motivate creative and expository writing.





Writing Guides for Children

The writing center concept is based on the assumption that children learn to write by writing with a minimum amount of direct instruction. Children, however, do need guidance and instruction to develop effective writing skills. The writing guides outlined below should be included in writing centers to help direct and improve students' writing abilities. Guides complement but do not replace teacher-directed instruction. Instruction based on diagnosed writing needs of particular children will still be needed.

Descriptive words. Good writers use descriptive words. Open-ended lists can be posted in the writing center to which children refer and add new words. Words can be categorized according to:

Movement: Scurrying, bobbing, prancing.
Sound: Screaming, rustling, splashing.
Color: Transparent pink, burnished brown, muddy brown.
Pattern: Weather lined, spotted, splotched.
Condition: Parched, tranquil, ancient.
Smell: Musty, fishy, clean.
Feelings: Abandoned, desolate, anxious.
Texture: Velvety, prickly, knobby.
Shape: Rounded, craggy, pointed.
Words instead of *said*: Replied, stammered, chimed.

Tools of the writer. Just as artists have brushes, paints, and canvas, so writers have their tools. Alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, and onomatopoeia are used by writers to create pictures, feelings, and sounds in the consciousness of their readers. Children can be made aware of such tools by open-ended lists in the writing center. The following examples illustrate each tool.

Alliteration: The occurrence of two or more words having the same initial sound, such as dirty dusty driver, curious canary, and slinky slithering snake.

Simile: A figure of speech in which two unlike things are explicitly compared, such as a ship as tall as the sky, clouds like fleecy sheep, and hair like steel wool.

Metaphor: A figure of speech in which two unlike things are implicitly compared, such as ice cream castles, whipped cream walls, and skyscraper waves.

Personification: Attributing to an object, animal, or abstraction certain human characteristics, such as the fire listened, the horses screamed, or their love sang.

Onomatopoeia: The use of words that sound like their referent, such as clip-clop, hiss, or blurp.

Poetry forms. An effective way for children to begin writing poetry is by utilizing the specific formats of different poetic styles. This is not to imply that one can produce quality poetry simply by following a formula. However, such structures give children a tangible format from which to start writing. The following poetry forms, their characteristics, and an example of each may be displayed on posters in writing centers to remind children of various poetic forms and to encourage their use.

Haiku
Couplet
Triplet
Limerick
Quatrain
Acrostic poems
Cinquain
Tanka
Diamante

Handwriting charts. Even though perfect handwriting is not usually emphasized, children should have a visual image of exemplary handwriting. To show children how writing is supposed to look, handwriting charts should be displayed in the writing center. Younger children might need such aids more than older students.

Formats for friendly and business letters. Writing guides showing the format for letter writing can be displayed on posters in the writing center. These should include the location of the various components used in both friendly and business letters. At a glance, children will know which letters to capitalize, where to place colons and commas, what is found in the inside address, and so forth. Such visual aids help with the mechanical aspects of letter writing, thus freeing the children to concentrate on the thoughts they want to communicate.

In Conclusion

The teacher-made materials suggested in this fastback will probably be more effective than commercially prepared items because of teacher involvement. There is no magic found in the writing center materials and activities; they are only tools. Activities will stimulate children's writing only to the extent that the teacher implementing them understands the rationale for their use. A certain "magic" does emerge, however, from knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers. Somehow children "catch" these teachers' zeal for learning and genuine interest in people. Such exhilarating persons not only stimulate writing, but more importantly, exemplify the ultimate goal of education—joy in learning and living.